

PRIORITIES

The key to getting an impossible
amount of work actually done

Jim Alampi

Priorities Drive Achievement

Is there any CEO or leader in the business world who has enough time to do everything they want and need to? The fast pace of today's world combined with the complexity of growing an entrepreneurial business can be overwhelming to even the best leaders. The challenges of setting strategy, building a leadership team, providing resources, removing obstacles, creating team and company alignment around goals, insuring accountability and achieving results is an awesome responsibility but it is what CEOs get paid for. The only possible way to juggle this many balls is to become an expert at setting *and* maintaining priorities.

It's An Alignment Process

The good news is that most executives use some kind of system to keep track of their goals and priorities. It may be as simple as a handwritten to-do list, or as complex as technology-enabled systems. Regardless of the system, it is essential that some tracking system be employed, unless of course you have a photographic memory and can remember everything via memory. Even with this unique and rare capability, however, seeing and being reminded of priorities has some real value for most CEOs.

But even when individual executives utilize some personal tracking system, far too often their priorities are not clearly tied to company-level goals. And without a company-driven focus, each executive may actually meet his priorities but the company may still miss its goals. So the starting point has to be setting the top 3 to 5 company goals for the year and quarter, e.g. the goals that when achieved have the greatest impact to the company in the period. Verne Harnish accurately identifies Priorities as one of the key habits of great executives in his excellent book *Mastering the Rockefeller Habits*.

Letting Others Put the Monkey On Your Back

CEOs have to listen to and satisfy many constituents, and that is often the cause of "priority failure." Most CEOs start with the best intentions, picking the important and mission-critical things they must focus on. But no sooner is that list complete, than someone stops by with a great idea or a problem and adds it to the CEO's priority list, often without him even realizing it. How many CEOs not only allow this to happen but even worse, facilitate it by acknowledging the idea or problem and agreeing to get involved or do something about it? *This isn't what CEOs are paid to do!* Allowing others to put monkeys on your back or delegate upward is one of the most common barriers to company growth because CEOs who let others control their priorities cannot possibly lead, they react.

CEOs must jealously protect their own priorities, constantly refusing to accept responsibility for tasks, goals, and problems that rightfully belong to others, never letting anyone hijack their agenda. That is true leadership and a required behavior for entrepreneurial CEOs who want to grow their companies.

The Good Idea Monkey

One of your executives or employees stops by and is clearly excited by a new idea for the business. The typical first reaction is to acknowledge the idea and add it to your list of things to do. Many CEOs keep a yellow pad of good ideas that just keeps getting larger and often becomes a source of frustration. The secret to handling this monkey is not to add it to your list, as counter-intuitive as that seems.

The best response to the Good Idea Monkey is to acknowledge the value of the idea but not add it to your list of things to do. A statement like “That’s a really interesting idea and we should consider it. We have already set our priorities for this quarter and this idea doesn’t appear more impactful to the company than our current priorities, so please keep this on your to-do list and bring it up again at the next quarterly executive team meeting.”

The “I’ve Got a Problem” Monkey

One of the most common and problematic CEO leadership behaviors is allowing subordinates to put problems on your agenda. And this becomes a self-fulfilling behavior, i.e. the more you allow it the worse it gets. Most CEOs usually have the answer to problems the vast majority of time. But again, being the “answer man” is not what CEOs are paid to do! Why have experienced, well-paid executives on your team if you allow them to abdicate their responsibility and drag you into their problem-solving?

One of the best ways to grow people and improve accountability is by using the seven most powerful words a leader can use which are, “I don’t know; what do you think?” These words work even when you do know the answer, and should be utilized instead of providing the answer. Your subordinates need to understand that it is their job to look at issues, develop alternative solutions, evaluate those solutions and make recommendations for actions. If the boss is going to provide all the answers, why does he need subordinates?

I'm sure if you ever interviewed the executive teams at the three public companies I had the privilege to lead, they would say that I was one of the least knowledgeable CEOs they ever worked for. This reaction comes from my steadfast refusal to allow them to drag me into what was clearly their responsibility. I used to have Senior and Executive Vice Presidents who would come to my office and in a somewhat whiny voice ask "Jim, what do you think we should do about ____." Before they even finished the question my reaction would be "I don't know, what do you think?"

If they came into my office indicating that they had a particular problem, had evaluated the solution alternatives, done an ROI and recommended a certain course of action, they had my attention in a second. But asking me to provide a solution for something they were getting paid to do was not in the cards, despite the fact that I knew the right answer over 90% of the time.

Conclusion

Every CEO needs to realize that one of the most critical parts of his job is growing his organization by focusing on the most important priorities. The leader who wants to be involved in all new ideas or problems will ultimately become a barrier to growth. And by allowing others to add priorities to his list, the next level of leaders will never take ownership, grow and be prepared for greater responsibility.

The good news is that like most leadership skills, there is no great secret to setting and protecting your priorities. By simply setting priorities tied to company-level goals and having the discipline not to be an "answer man", a leader can become very skilled at maintaining a manageable to-do list and even more valuable to his organization.

###